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# OUR PIONEER HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

*By*

EVARTS B. GREENE

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## OUR PIONEER HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

[An address by Evarts Boutell Greene, president of the American Historical Association, delivered before the Twelfth Indiana History Conference, at Indianapolis, December 12, 1930, in tribute to the Centennial of the Indiana Historical Society.]

My first obligation and privilege on this centennial anniversary is to bring to the Indiana Historical Society the heartiest greetings and congratulations of the American Historical Association. It is also a great pleasure, as well as a simple act of justice, to acknowledge at this time the unique and generous contribution which our friends in Indiana have made to our national organization. Measured in terms of money only your contribution far exceeds that of any other state. If I may speak more personally, for my colleagues and myself, I should like to place on record here our special sense of indebtedness to Senator Albert J. Beveridge and to Mrs. Beveridge for their unstinted service not only through their own gifts but in enlisting the coöperation of so many other friends. For most of us, the business of raising money is not in itself congenial; but in this case I shall always be grateful for the opportunity it brought of personal association with one of the most conspicuous examples we have had in this country of distinction in politics combined with no less distinction in scholarship. Speaking from the point of view of the historical guild, we were proud to think of him as a fellow-craftsman. I am sure it will be a satisfaction to you all to know that the first volume of what promises to be a notable series of publications, made possible by the Beveridge-Indiana Memorial Fund, is nearly ready for the press, under the competent direction of Professor Ulrich B. Phillips.

When the Indiana Historical Society was formed in 1830, this particular kind of service to the muse of history was still

comparatively new, not only in the Mississippi Valley, but even in the original thirteen states. The oldest of the state organizations still in existence, the Massachusetts Historical Society, was even then less than forty years old, and the New York society, which came next, had completed its first quarter century only a year before your society was organized. No other state society then had more than a decade of history behind it, and less than half of the original thirteen states can boast of a state historical society, still in existence, which dates back to 1830. In short, your society clearly belongs in the small and select circle of the pioneers, in what has now become one of the most widespread and creditable forms of American literary enterprise.

That an institution of this kind should have been set up in Indianapolis in December, 1830, is in itself a remarkable circumstance. The idea of forming a society for the study of history does not ordinarily come to the members of a frontier community. That is usually the work of a people whose pioneer experiences have already receded well into the past and can only be brought back to consciousness through the laborious efforts of scholars and antiquarians. When, for instance, the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded in 1791, Boston was already much older than Indianapolis now is. Five years after its founding, the New York Historical Society celebrated the bicentennial anniversary of Hudson's voyage up the North River; and the corporate life of that city went back for a century and a half. Both Boston and New York were small towns according to present standards; but as centers of economic, social, political, and intellectual activity, they already had an importance in the life of the country quite transcending their proportion of the total population.

In contrast with the sister organizations of New York and Boston, the Indiana society came to birth in a community still very near the pioneer stage of its development. Statehood had been achieved fourteen years before, but though the French settlements on the Wabash began in the first half of the eighteenth

century, the fifth census showed no town in the state with as many as two thousand inhabitants. Indianapolis resembled Washington in being a capital created by legislative fiat, and according to the federal census had less than eleven hundred people. The aspects of the town which impressed contemporary observers clearly marked it as a community close to, if not actually on, the westward moving frontier. "Our streets," wrote a contemporary, "are one moving mass of living men, women, and children, carriages, wagons, cattle, horses, hogs, and sheep, all joyously wending their way to their new habitations." All this fits admirably into our picture of life in the Old Northwest during the exuberant and expansive era of Jacksonian democracy. It is more difficult to fit into such a scene that group of sober-minded citizens who met on that memorable December day in 1830, to form a society which should collect documents and publish the results of historical researches. Nevertheless one part of the picture is as real as the other, the strenuous pioneer not more so than his contemplative neighbor already anxious to preserve the records of a great historic process. It is suggestive in this connection that your first president, Benjamin Parke, had himself less than twenty years before taken part in the fight at Tippecanoe.

I shall leave to others the pleasant task of giving new life to some of the men who rank as founders in this historical enterprise, to tell more concretely than I can how the idea took shape, what were the chief sources of inspiration, whether in the older commonwealths from which the Indiana population had come, or in the preparation of the soil by other agencies of culture. In any case, there is little doubt that the new society followed somewhat closely the models provided by the few older organizations then in existence. So your Indiana story forms a natural part of a larger history of the whole historical society movement in the United States. That movement first emerges clearly with the generation which won the fight for independence, formed our first state governments, and set up the new federal Constitution.

Convinced that they were doing great things, and anxious that the story should be properly told, the men of the Revolutionary era were ready to be impressed with the need of assembling material for the future historian. Individuals could collect documents and write books as David Ramsay did, and William Gordon, and John Marshall; but, after all, materials had to be collected on a scale too large for any individual effort, before the historian could have proper foundations on which to build a solid structure. In the summer of 1789, while Washington and his associates were gradually putting into operation the new machinery of the federal government, there were a number of men who already had this subject much on their minds. Conspicuous among them were these three: Jeremy Belknap, of Boston, John Pintard, of New York, and Ebenezer Hazard, the postmaster-general of the Confederation and one of the keenest antiquarians of the time.

Jeremy Belknap was a Congregational minister who had recently been called from New Hampshire to a Boston pulpit. Like some other New England ministers of his day, he was an active-minded person with varied intellectual pursuits. His scientific interests were sufficiently recognized to give him a place in both of the two organizations of national standing devoted to such studies, namely, the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at Boston. Belknap's chief scholarly interest, however, was in history. In 1784 he published his excellent *History of New Hampshire*, and he was now ready to take a leading part in a new venture of coöperative scholarship.

On August 10, 1789, Belknap wrote to his friend Hazard: "This day a Mr. Pintard called to see me. He says he is an acquaintance of yours, and wants to form a Society of Antiquaries, &c." These men apparently had in mind an organization corresponding, for their own country, to those well-known British institutions, the Society of Antiquaries in London, which after a period of suspended animation was revived in 1717 and later enjoyed the patronage of George III, and the organiza-



tion of the same name in Edinburgh. Hazard was glad to give a good account of Pintard and also expressed his entire sympathy with the project, which apparently looked to the formation of a national organization.

John Pintard, whose name is still one to conjure with among New York antiquarians, is not much known elsewhere; but he deserves to be introduced to a wider circle. He was a good deal of a personage in the New York society of his day, and at one time or another he was actively concerned in a great variety of municipal enterprises, including the Tammany Society, the Chamber of Commerce (of which he became secretary), the General Theological Seminary, and the American Bible Society. He was later associated with such men as Egbert Benson and De Witt Clinton in the founding of the New York Historical Society. For the present, however, Pintard's larger scheme of a national or interstate society of antiquaries failed to take shape. In the meantime, Belknap, with a group of kindred spirits in Boston, was developing something less ambitious but better adapted to bring about practical results at that particular time.

After much preliminary discussion, Belknap finally produced, in August, 1790, his "Plan of an Antiquarian Society," which was meant to be a comparatively small group of workers, with a minimum of what we should now call "hot air." There were not to be more than seven members at the beginning and their business was to be "collecting, preserving, and communicating the antiquities of America." Though specially identified with a particular state and city, their interests were not to be confined within these limits; nothing American should be foreign to them. Furthermore, the society was to begin correspondence with "gentlemen in each of the United States, requesting them to form similar societies," with which it was proposed to exchange information about "discoveries and improvements." Incidentally it may be mentioned that this is today the special concern of our national "Conference of Historical Societies," of which our associate, Dr. Coleman, is now secretary.

Finally, in January, 1791, the plan took definite shape in the organization of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Beginning with modest quarters, first on the premises of the old Massachusetts Bank, and then in the attic of Faneuil Hall, the society set to work at once and in 1792 inaugurated a series of publications which has since grown to monumental proportions. Emphasizing from the beginning the policy of gathering and publishing original material, the Massachusetts Historical Society has enlisted a succession of able editors from the days of Belknap to those of Charles Deane and Worthington C. Ford. In quality, even more than in mere bulk, the work of this pathfinder among American historical societies has set an inspiring example to all the younger members of that "goodly fellowship."

Fifteen years passed after John Pintard's first memorable conference with Jeremy Belknap before the New York antiquarian was able to launch in his home town the second of our surviving societies. After some preliminary meetings in the old "Federal Hall" on Wall Street, the new society was formed in November, 1804, the year of Jefferson's triumphant reelection to the presidency. Among those associated with the New York Historical Society were such distinguished personages as Egbert Benson, for several years a member of the Federal Congress and then a judge of the State Supreme Court; De Witt Clinton, then mayor of the city; Rufus King; Gouverneur Morris; and Chancellor James Kent. The New York society, like its predecessor in Massachusetts, soon settled down to its work. In 1809 it carried through a notable celebration of the bicentennial anniversary of Hudson's voyage up the river which bears his name. There was an elaborate banquet, with numerous toasts, commemorating not only men of action, but also various representatives of the historian's craft, both European and American. Among the scholars thus honored was the Elizabethan Richard Hakluyt, the compiler of the famous collection of English voyages. Toast No. 12 was: "Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas. May future compilers of historical documents emulate

their diligence and fidelity." No. 16 was to the Massachusetts Historical Society, "which set the honorable example of collecting and preserving what relates to the history of our country"; and Jeremy Belknap himself was individually remembered, along with other early American historians. More lasting than this after-dinner eloquence was the preparation of Volume I of the Society's *Collections*, made up largely of documentary material appropriate to the Hudson anniversary and published in 1811.

Of interest to those of us who have tried, with varying degrees of success, to secure financial assistance for historical work from state legislatures, are some early efforts of the New York society. Under date of March 22, 1810, De Witt Clinton wrote to John Pintard: "Dear Sir: I have the pleasure of informing you that the bill for endowing the Historical Society, and killing the wolves and panthers passed the Senate this morning without opposition. If the Federal Assembly shall act as liberally as the Republican Senate, it will go down, but I am fearful that your party will be very deficient in this respect." Apparently Clinton's forebodings were justified; for, a little later, Professor Samuel Mitchell of Columbia College, who combined his academic chair with a seat in the New York legislature, was obliged to report that the Federalist lower house had not done its part. "I have the mortification," wrote Mitchell, "to report that the bill from the Senate for the destruction of wild beasts and the encouragement of history, was this day debated and finally rejected." "The great objection," he explained, "was that too many lottery jobs had been authorized already." The society was not discouraged, however, and in the midst of the War of 1812, the legislature authorized the payment of a few thousand dollars from the proceeds of another lottery to buy books, manuscripts, etc., for the society's library. Meantime, a second volume of the *Collections* was issued in 1814, and before 1830 three others had been added—a total of five as against twenty-two of the Massachusetts series.

Third in order of time among the historical societies already

known to students when the Indiana society began its career, was the American Antiquarian Society, which, though more particularly associated with New England, is nevertheless a nationally significant organization with a select but widely distributed membership. Its founder, Isaiah Thomas, was a veteran Whig journalist who, with the on-coming of the Revolution, thought it prudent to transfer his paper, the *Massachusetts Spy*, from Boston to the more peaceful inland town of Worcester. In later years he gave much of his time to scholarly pursuits, published his still valuable *History of Printing*, and built up a substantial library. Finally, he turned his thoughts toward the establishment of a new institution for the promotion of history. In October, 1812, a few months after the declaration of war, Thomas joined with five other signers in a petition to the Massachusetts legislature, asking a state charter for a society which should work for the promotion of the arts and sciences. More particularly it should gather materials for a record of American progress and thus facilitate the labors of future historians. The petitioners asked for no appropriations and no assistance from the state other than such advantages as might accrue to their work from an act of incorporation. A charter was accordingly voted by the legislature, and under its provisions the society held its first meeting in November, 1812, at the Exchange Coffee House in Boston.

In 1813, Thomas, who was the dominating personality in the new society, prepared at its request an extremely interesting account of the organization and the work it was intended to do. He emphasized the necessity of coöperation for objects quite beyond the powers of individual workers and referred specifically to the work of similar societies of antiquaries in the old world, including those of England, Scotland, Sweden, and Italy. His program of research was broadly stated and he quoted with approval the words of Sir William Jones, defining the interests of another learned society: "Man and Nature—whatever is, or has been performed by the one, or produced by the other." Thomas was no less anxious to maintain the national char-



acter of the society; it was "not intended for the particular advantage of any one state or section of the Union," and he hoped that its members might be "found in every part of our Western continent and its adjacent islands." Quite in accord with the national spirit of the undertaking was the election of councilors not only from the eastern states, but from the South and West. For the trans-Allegheny country we find such names as those of Alexander Marshall in Kentucky, Winthrop Sargent in Mississippi, and Caleb Atwater in Ohio. The first volume of the society's *Transactions*, published in 1820, included Atwater's *Description of Antiquities discovered in Ohio and other Western States*. A curious reflection of the troubled times in which the society had its beginning is Thomas' argument for locating its library and museum in Worcester rather than Boston. In a small inland town there would be less danger from disastrous fires, so frequent in large cities, "as well as from the ravages of the enemy to which seaports in particular are so much exposed in times of war." Whatever may be thought of the founder's judgment in this respect, historians all over the country have profited by the treasures gathered for their use by Thomas and his successors.

In 1830, the three societies just mentioned were the outstanding agencies for gathering historical material and promoting historical research. In comparison with them the historical work of the colleges was negligible. In the decade between 1820 and 1830, the historical society idea was evidently spreading, though still mainly confined to New England. In 1821 a society was formed in Essex County, Massachusetts, out of which the Essex Institute was to develop—still, probably, the most effective county organization in the United States. In 1822 the historical societies of Rhode Island and Maine were organized. The former had issued one volume of *Collections* before 1830, reproducing very appropriately Roger Williams' treatise on the Indian languages of America. The first volume of the Maine series, not issued until 1831, contains interesting reflections illustrating the mood in which some of these American students of

a hundred years ago approached their work; "if," they said, "we are still a young people, we have passed the period of childhood. We have arrived at an age in our national existence when there is a sober and chastening pleasure in looking backward as well as forward."

The New Hampshire Historical Society began a year later than its neighbor in Maine, and originated apparently in a public celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the first colonial settlement in 1623. The first step was taken by twenty-one gentlemen who assembled at Portsmouth in May, 1823; and the society was incorporated by the legislature in June of that year. The promoters quite naturally recalled the early labors of Belknap in gathering materials for New Hampshire history, and referred to the work of the Massachusetts Historical Society as demonstrating the value of such an organization. They also had the support of such distinguished personages as Governor William Plumer, and Governor Levi Woodbury, afterwards secretary of the treasury under Jackson and Van Buren. A series of *Collections* was begun at once; the first two volumes were issued in 1824 and 1827, respectively, and they followed the Massachusetts model in being made up largely of documentary material, including Penhallow's classical work on the history of the Indian wars. Rather unaccountably, Connecticut lagged behind the other New England states; a Connecticut Historical Society was formed in 1825, but did not become active until many years later.

Outside of New England and New York, the promoters of our middle-western societies had practically no models to follow. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania was indeed formed in 1825; but though it was proposed to publish half a volume every six months, only one instalment was published before 1830 and the officers complained that "few original communications were offered." Of the important state historical societies which have done so much in recent years to open up the sources of southern history, none antedate the formation of the Indiana society. The Virginia and Georgia

societies began in 1831 and 1839, respectively; Maryland in the early forties, and South Carolina in 1855.

On the other hand, the Indiana enterprise does not stand quite alone in the "Old Northwest." In 1827 and 1828, Illinois had an Antiquarian and Historical Society whose most active promoter seems to have been James Hall, for a time judge of the State Circuit Court, a journalist, and a figure of some importance in the literary history of the Mississippi Valley. Apparently the Illinois society came to an end before the Indiana society appeared on the scene. In Ohio, notwithstanding the early historical and archaeological activities of certain individuals, there was apparently no active historical society until the thirties. The Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, chartered in 1831, issued Volume I of its *Transactions* in 1839. Michigan comes into the record comparatively early, with a group of historically minded persons at Detroit who called themselves the Historical Society of Michigan, adopted a constitution and by-laws in 1828, and issued a few papers including addresses by such distinguished persons as Lewis Cass and Henry R. Schoolcraft. Cass, who was the governor of the territory, was also a man of literary aspirations and had published a few years before a work entitled *Inquiries concerning the History, Traditions and Languages of Indians Living within the United States*. Schoolcraft's reputation as traveler and Indian expert is of course well known. Cass left the state in 1831 to become secretary of war under Jackson; Schoolcraft's labors carried him to other parts of the West; and the Michigan society issued its last publication in 1834. In 1830 Wisconsin was still a part of Michigan Territory, and nearly twenty years were to pass before the Wisconsin Historical Society began the service which was to give it, during the next half century, the leading place among the historical societies of the Northwest.

To keep the breath of life in a society devoted to historical studies was not an easy matter in the Middle West of the 1830's; but the Indiana group did what it could to establish helpful relations with workers in other states and some of their

most interesting early contacts were with New England. To inform themselves as to the origins of civil government in the Northwest, they resorted to the venerable Nathan Dane, one of several claimants to the honor of formulating the Ordinance of 1787. His reply forms a part of your first volume of publications, and he contributed to the library of the society nine volumes of his *Abridgment of American Law*. Edward Everett was another Massachusetts friend, and that state was strongly represented among the early honorary members. Among those elected, in addition to Dane and Everett, were Joseph Story, John Quincy Adams, and Jared Sparks. The New York group was similarly represented by Chancellor James Kent; and the western workers, by Cass of Michigan and James Hall of Illinois. Evidently your Indiana pioneers, though conscious of special responsibility for their own state and for the Northwest as a whole, were aware of what was being done elsewhere and anxious to keep in touch with it.

Between the modest beginnings of your society in 1830 and the enlarged usefulness of recent years, there have intervened less fortunate periods of apparent inactivity. The stream did perhaps continue to flow; but for many years it disappeared almost, if not altogether, from sight, like certain rivers which flow for considerable distances underground. Now, with increasingly liberal support from the public, we may hope that the stream will steadily widen and deepen.

In conclusion, let me note a few points of comparison between the historical agencies of a century ago and those of the present time. One of the most striking changes is in the part taken in such work by our universities and colleges. In 1830 the teaching of history in such institutions was almost negligible; and there were no university professorships set apart for the study of American history. The workers of 1830 were either free lances, like George Bancroft, who was presently to bring out the first volume of his *History of the United States*; or, if they felt the need of coöperation, they worked for the most part through the pioneer historical societies, like those of Massa-



chusetts and New York. The chief promoters of these organizations were not generally college teachers, but clergymen, lawyers, physicians, journalists, and politicians of a scholarly turn of mind. It is only during the last half-century that the universities have made any substantial contribution to the promotion of research in American history. There were individuals in college departments of history; but, in general, it seems fair to say that the new era began with the pioneer work of Johns Hopkins University. The publication of the Johns Hopkins *Studies* was followed in the next twenty years by the historical series of Harvard, Columbia, and Wisconsin; many other universities have since followed their example.

When the universities once began to realize their responsibility for teaching and research in American history, they proceeded to draw upon the material accumulated for them by the older historical societies. It is hard, for instance, to think of the Harvard work in American history developing as it did, without the publications and manuscript collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society; in a more personal way, also, the early university teachers at Cambridge profited by their contacts with the older workers in the societies.<sup>1</sup> What was true of Harvard was even more conspicuous in Wisconsin, where there has long been a peculiarly close connection between the state university and the state historical society. It was the work of such men as Lyman Draper and Reuben G. Thwaites in building up the great library at Madison which prepared the way for Frederick J. Turner and his successors in the field of Western history.

One of the most significant examples of fruitful coöperation between universities and historical societies was the publication of Winsor's *Narrative and Critical History of America*, which opened up the sources of American history as no other single work before or since that time has ever done. The editor of that work was the librarian of Harvard University, and several

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<sup>1</sup>An admirable illustration of the value of such contacts is the work of the late Professor Edward Channing.

chapters were contributed by university men, but the representation of the historical societies was conspicuous.

Having received much from the societies, the universities have in recent years done something to balance the account. The rapid development of historical societies and state departments of history in the South and West was partly due to the enthusiasm of young scholars trained in the graduate departments of Johns Hopkins and other similar institutions, both east and west. The higher standards of work now prevailing in the societies are the result partly of this influence and partly also of increasingly close contacts among the workers in different parts of the country. The formation, under the auspices of the American Historical Association, of the annual Conference of Historical Societies, provides an admirable clearing house of information, enabling the younger and weaker organizations to profit by the experience of those which have seen longer service in the field, or have been able to develop new forms of useful activity.

Meantime, and more particularly in the South and West, our state governments have been coöperating much more generously than in the earlier years. The older societies accomplished admirable results through the private initiative of a few enthusiastic students and the generosity of individual benefactors. When, for instance, Isaiah Thomas organized the American Antiquarian Society he asked for nothing except a simple charter of incorporation. So today the New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania societies are essentially private institutions. In the West and South, however, state legislatures have played an increasingly important role. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, though an association of private individuals, is also distinctly a state agency, liberally supported by state appropriations. Elsewhere similar work is now being done through definitely organized state departments, as, for instance, the departments of archives and history in Iowa, Alabama, and Mississippi; the historical commissions of North Carolina and Indiana; and the State Historical Library of Illinois, whose

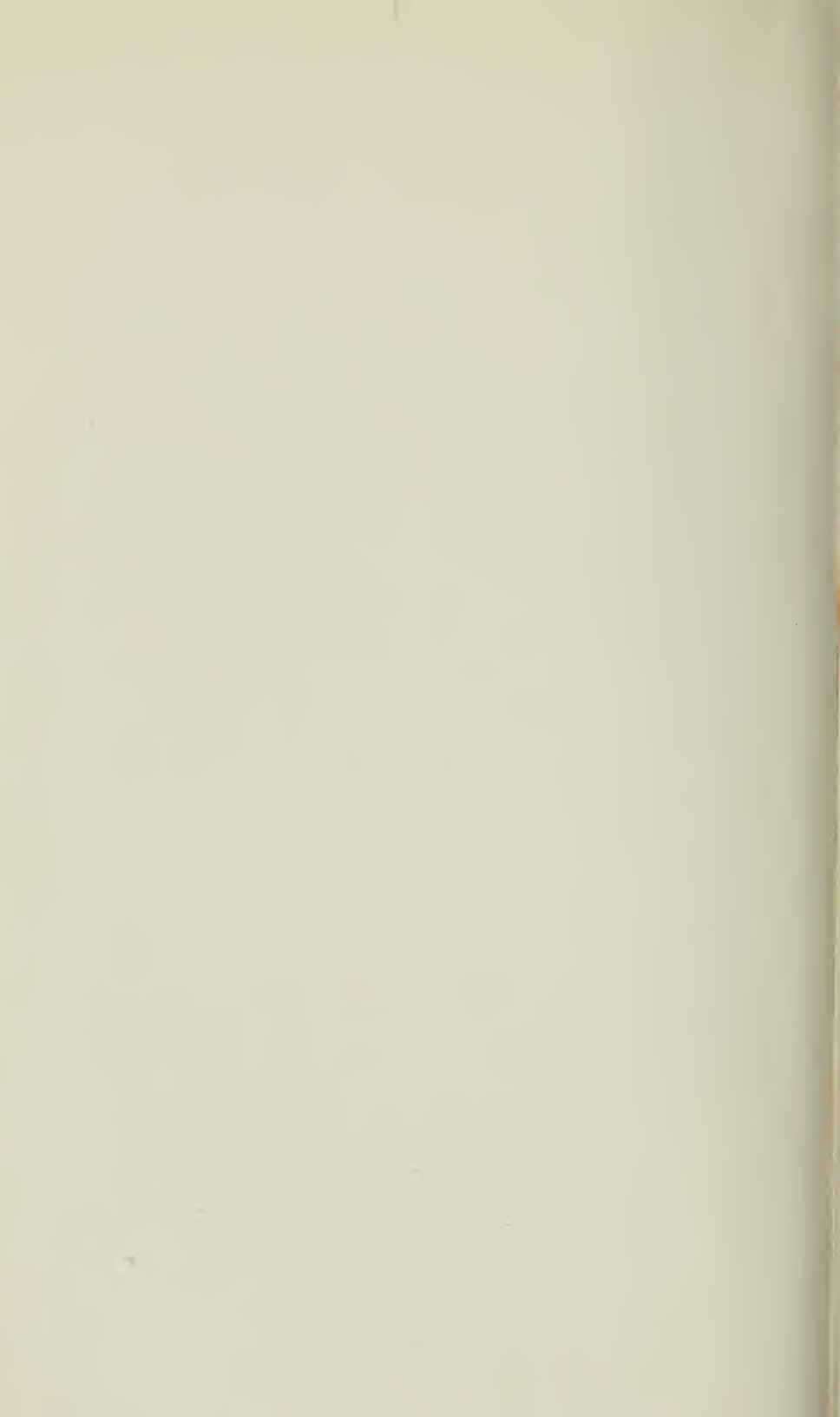
publications first became important under the editorship of my former colleague, the late Clarence W. Alvord.

This is a great country, which will, we trust, always have room for many kinds of people and preserve a catholic spirit, ready to recognize and respect many different methods of solving social problems. So, in cultivating our common interest in American history, we shall not quarrel about the particular agencies through which work is being done, provided only that it is done, and well done. Even in an age of organization and corporate enterprise there is plenty of room for such comparatively individualistic undertakings as those of George Bancroft, Francis Parkman, and Henry Adams. Yet the field is so large that the need of coöperation becomes more and more evident. University departments and research institutions, privately endowed societies and state departments under various forms—all have their parts to play; but so far as we can see, societies like your own will always be needed. So I close with my best wishes for the second century of the Indiana Historical Society. If I were an old-fashioned orator of the days when men still ventured to quote Latin, I should say, "*Vivat, floreat, crescat,*" long may the society live, and flower, and increase! As it is, I am tempted to end with the homelier words, endeared to us by Joseph Jefferson in *Rip Van Winkle*—"Here's to your good health, and your family's, and may you live long and prosper!"











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